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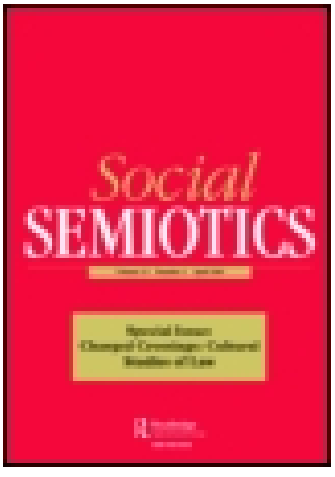

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Presenting Michael Jackson™

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SOCIAL SEMIOTICS VOLUME 17 NUMBER 4 (DECEMBER 2007)

Presenting Michael Jackson™

Seth Clark Silberman

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Presenting Michael Jackson™ explicates the marketed product that parades as a man we think we know well because he has grown up on stage, in front of documenting cameras. Such screened coverage belies the calculations that Michael Jackson™ entails. To discuss them, the essay compares Michael's notorious, late and pajama-sporting arrival to his trial in March 2005 and the November 1991 debut of the short film *Black or White* to consider Michael the man's hand in the public dissembling of the icon so many once thought so safe. In that Michael Jackson™ is always seemingly on the verge of collapse, the essay finds an opportunity to assess the popular possibilities for poststructuralist thinking, namely the Derridean deconstruction that makes possible queer theory methodology. The kind of play that remains when reading Michael's life-as-career illustrates the enchanting reach that Derrida's ''theatre of the countersignature'' can have when staged by an actor who commands still a global audience. Surveillance awaits a curiosity Michael continues to deliver with such precision.

Keywords Poststructuralism; queer theory; Jacques Derrida; Michael Jackson

> What they're throwing at you, you're grabbing. You hold it, you touch it and you whip it back—it's like a Frisbee. (Michael Jackson, quoted in Miller 1983, 52)

> You thought you were deciphering, tracking down, pursuing, you are included. He had affected everything with his signature. He has affected his signature. He has affected it with everything. (Derrida 2004, 10)

Michael Jackson seems to struggle. He emerges from his black SUV ''disheveled, limping and heavily sedated,'' as *The New York Times* reports, at 9:37 a.m. on Thursday 10 March 2005 (Broder 2005, A14). He is 67 minutes late for the ninth day of his child molestation trial. Photographs of that ''dramatic start to a tense day'' in court with his 15-year-old accuser delivering ''an explicit account of Mr. Jackson masturbating him twice and repeatedly serving him alcohol at his Neverland ranch'' tell the following familiar story: *Michael Jackson has lost touch with reality* (Broder 2005, A14). In snapshots like the one that sits mostly

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above the front-page fold of the 11 March *New York Times*, he appears frail, ''dressed in blue print pajamas and looking more spectral than ever'' (Broder 2005, A14). One bodyguard holds his right wrist. Another umbrella-bearing one grips his left bicep. A third bodyguard and his father watch. They help frame the star, poised with a pale, despondent face, and crowned with unkempt hair, tousled just so.

His depicted state complements so well the hour of live speculation on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News that precedes the seven minutes it takes him to amble from his SUV to the Santa Maria courthouse; the catastrophe seems staged, not just by the ''pajama-clad Wacko Jacko,'' but also by an awaiting, colluding media (Li and Kranes 2005, 4; see also Johnson 2005, 7D). BBC News Correspondent Peter Bowes confesses as much on his blog: ''Most reporters covering the case sit on the edge of their seats every day half expecting something bizarre or surreal [like Jackson's 'pajama incident'] to happen'' (Bowes 2005). A better entrance could not have been devised by Michael himself—and I call him that here not because I know Michael Joseph Jackson apart from the images I consume like anyone else, but because his pop culture presentation works in line with the method of modern stardom that acknowledges celebrities on a first-name basis and conflates public presence with intimate knowledge.

The Michael I know is a marketed Michael Jackson™ product. Presenting *that* Michael Jackson™ prevails as a tactic attendant both to audience needs and to a career that has exacted a series of stratagems incorporating some degree of disarray long before this March morning in Central California rededicated collective speculation about Michael's erotic involvement in events that remain off-camera. I want to make Michael Jackson™'s consistent strategy explicit with this essay as I put into dialogue Michael's *Black or White* video (1991) with the equally-produced event outside the Santa Maria courthouse. Both exemplify the savvy provocation that presenting Michael Jackson™ entails—one that most can read only as a problem of morals, ethics, celebrity, or all the above. Finding only a problem in Michael obscures the wily allure of Michael Jackson™. *Problematic* Michael unites those in the media or in academia claiming to know definitely all what Michael denies, all that he cannot admit about himself. He intoxicates his critics to such a degree they presume they can step outside their expertise or their discipline and act like legal scholars, counselors, or clinical psychologists. Michael's popularity fuels the seemingly universal access to trial language that translates the enigma he once was into an allegory about a miscarriage of justice. By contrast, I want to register Michael Jackson™ through the discourse to which I have access. Presenting Michael Jackson™ entails a method of deliberate juxtaposition that welcomes the tabloid speculation Michael decries. Just like Michael's notorious display of his third child from the fourth floor balcony of the Adlon Hotel in Berlin on 19 November 2002, Michael Jackson™ dangles the freak we so comfortably expect. We look still.

In Michael Jackson™, I find a productive ambiguity that would make Marcel Duchamp proud. Michael works much like the ''enfant terrible who had thumbed his nose at the pantheon of art,'' as his obituary celebrates the process with

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which ''Marcel Duchamp the artist had blossomed into Marcel Duchamp the idea'' (Keneas 1968, 1). Duchamp *the idea* circulates through his readymades, or the everyday objects he transmuted into art, like the upside-down cast porcelain urinal he marked ''R. Mutt 1917'' and entitled *Fountain* (1917). More important is the process that situates that commonplace object artistically. Duchamp positions a found object *as* art not to discredit aesthetics, but to reveal vision as merely a prop in the more important process of apperception. What we see requires interpretation and context, not simple documentation or presence. Likewise, Michael wrenchingly re-contextualizes Michael Jackson™ by offering the Michael we thought we knew, or the Michael we hold onto despite the knowledge that molestation allegations produce, as a readymade. The star we see now serves as a prop in a speculative enterprise that puts in play the disarray that most find so freakishly divorced from the *Thriller* Michael. Such a comparison demonstrates just how much we had to assemble the winsomeness we wanted to see then. Or, as I explained to Libby Copeland, a *Washington Post* Staff Writer, for her reaction piece to Michael's acquittal: ''Michael has long had an interest in us thinking he's weird'' (quoted in Copeland 2005, C2).

Neither being weird nor brandishing it is Michael's invention. He amplifies merely a mechanics of celebrity that enamors an audience all the better if a star suggests, without confirming directly, lurid behavior happening just off camera. As Jonathan Alter explains: ''Some breaking of society's rules has always been acceptable—even desirable—in celebrities ... Such misbehavior wasn't deviant, in fact it almost confirmed the celebrity's normality'' (Alter 1993, 39). Michael Jackson™ appeals as a scandal that structures public morality in response to ''celebrity normality'' because the collective memories he inspires foreclose any end to the speculation. Because he has been conspicuously odd for so long, there seems to be an endless supply of images to discuss. After all, the success of any scandal depends less on the findings of press coverage than on the momentum the story gains in people's everyday lives, away from television (TV) screens, magazines, and newspapers (Bird 2003). I assert Michael's agency in the life of his scandal story not because I believe there remains some ''real'' Michael Joseph Jackson beyond a media machine or behind an audience he manipulates like a puppeteer, but because I want to reveal his conscious participation in an active coalition that exists through his representation (Hall 1980). I read Michael's authorship suspiciously like Richard Dyer refuses to read biographically any media representation: ''it still matters who [delivers a] performance'' but it cannot have ''any assumable relationship to [that] person's life or consciousness'' (Dyer 1991, 188). Indeed, the *Michael* I use throughout this essay signifies the expectations of celebrity intimacy more than the real person who does exist with (and perhaps despite) the career that becomes him. I juxtapose Michael with Michael Jackson™ to make more explicit the career deliberations that inspire almost simultaneously the crush of the media and its apologetic retreat from its guilty pleasure.

Michael Jackson™ makes sense to us now as ''the perverse product of the limitless love he enjoyed from his fans in his prime,'' as Simon Dumenco crowns

him for a *New York* magazine cover story about a ''celebrity–industry complex'' gone wild, because Michael has facilitated that image since he took control of his career as a teenager, when he accepted the role of The Scarecrow in *The Wiz* (1978) against his father's wishes and moved to New York with sister LaToya in July 1977 to begin preproduction (Dumenco 2003, 34). The decisiveness with which Michael continues to unsettle his public career-life I call *the implicit obvious*. Michael does not acknowledge what we think we see because *we know already* what he contributes to the Michael Jackson™ in which reporters, academics, TV pundits, and other armchair jurors presume to find Michael's own psychological, pathological problems. Michael's implicitly obvious indirection presents his every step with the strategic ambiguity that ''the multiaccentuality and polysemy'' of black vernacular productions express with or without melodic accompaniment (Gilroy 1991, 203; see also Levine 1978; Hurston 1995). Michael Jackson™ contributes to the longstanding ''antipathy towards the commodity form'' that Paul Gilroy asserts in the consumption patterns for black music that reveal ''a deep structure beneath ... contradictory surfaces [that seems] part intuitive, part calculated'' (Gilroy 1991, 210, 212). For Michael Jackson™, those call-and-response politics incorporate a career-life that has always been extraordinary: a presented image affected by melody, movement, marketing, and attendant applause. Complete and uncritical identification in the Michael Jackson™ he helps deploy, Michael refuses. The far from coincidental precision with which Michael projects Michael Jackson™ demonstrates how, as Richard Dyer explains, stars manipulate ''the whole set of problems inherent in the commonplace metaphor of life-as-theatre ... because what is interesting about them is not [any one] character they have constructed ... but rather the business of constructing/performing/being'' (Dyer 1982, 24). Or, like Marcel Duchamp did, Michael remains ''willing to become a fiction of his own idea of himself'' (Steefel 1973, 78).

I demonstrate Michael's fictionalizing method here by analyzing the dissembling, uncanny take on Michael Jackson™ that shapes the full-length version of the *Black or White* video (1991). Like Freud explains the fundamental disorientation of storytelling with his ''Uncanny'' theory about ''that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and has long been familiar,'' *Black or White* demonstrates how Michael Jackson™ operates (Freud 2003, 124). First, however, I dramatize the events that made the ''pajama incident'' so infamous and relay Michael's interest in P.T. Barnum's humbugs, or what Barnum calls ''glittering appearances [that] suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear'' (Barnum 1866, 20). Barnum's humbugs provided a model for the kind of attention Michael wanted to inspire through storytelling, as Michael explains in his autobiography *Moonwalk*, with which he wanted to ''make [people] see pictures, make them cry and laugh, take them *anywhere* emotionally with something as deceptively simple as words'' (Jackson 1988, 5). I produce Michael's appreciation of Barnum's skilled deception to counter the persistent resistance to see into ''the public discomfort with someone so palpably confusing,'' as Amy Sohn identifies ''Jackson the enigma''

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for *New York* magazine during the trial (Sohn 2005, 49). After all, any good enigma suggests far more than mere confusion; it invites active deciphering that "modifies the innocuous act of seeing . . . into a kind of initiation rite" (Paz 1973, 144).

That rite organizes *Black or White*: not Michael's first, but rather his first daring dissembling of Michael Jackson™ just when he was trying to re-establish his artistry with the *Dangerous* album he crafted without Quincy Jones, the producer to whom many credit *Thriller*'s success. Michael launched *Dangerous* by re-introducing and re-packaging Michael Jackson™ with a video that declares Michael's *textual* presence in the crowd-pleasing career-life he continues to market. *Black or White* extends the verisimilar doubt in his videos solidified by *Thriller*, in which there is no "real" Michael whether he masquerades as the star of a 1950s werewolf flick (whose varsity letter is a prominent "M"), as a dancing zombie, or as the "Michael" who reveals werewolf eyes to the on-looking camera at the video's end. With *Black or White*, Michael subverts his "We Are the World"-brand of multiculturalism as just another image easily and endlessly manipulated to figure the sexual juxtapositions that Jim Miller recognized in Michael long before, in the 10 January 1983 *Newsweek* article heralding the beginning of *Thriller*'s success: "Despite his showy style, Michael Jackson remains something of an enigma. Onstage in one of his sequined jump suits, he's a flamboyant picture of grace, a sleek jaguar ready to pounce. In photographs he's a creature of sweet sensuality, beguiling, angelic, androgynous. In person, through, he's quiet and reserved, a gangling young man of cagey reticence, with a childlike aura of wonder" (Miller 1983, 52).

In Michael Jackson™ I see an opportunity to assess the popular possibilities for poststructuralist thinking, namely the Derridean deconstruction that makes possible queer theory methodology (Silberman 2007). Neither needs resuscitation despite recent funereal assessments of the former as part of "the golden age of theory [that] is long past" or new appraisals of the latter as a disconnected endeavor that can be saved only with attention to "broad social concerns" (Eagleton 2003, 1; Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 2). The same anxieties about contemporary relevance attend every appearance of Michael Jackson™. Too often, discomfort obscures what deconstruction, queer theory, and Michael Jackson™ have in common: a materialist premise that intellectual production remains the conspicuous product of social relationships (Delphy 2005, 293). Certainly, all three "lose touch" with reality—but only in so far as they ponder *the manufacture* of that "reality." Deconstruction, queer theory, and Michael Jackson™ challenge any absolute truth "reality" assumes by making legible its continuous protocols. "Reality" constructs verisimilitude. Or, as Derrida speaks for all three modes of inquiry: "The point is not to remove oneself [but to produce] another writing of the question of Being or meaning" (Derrida 1995, 211–212). So, he writes *countersignatures* to render the dialogic meaning that we presume exists within an artist's signature left with an already-created object. Derrida asserts that "*there is text*" only when interlocutors contribute

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their ''far more voluminous, grandiose and impassioned [emotions] aroused by the[ir] encounter with the object'' (2004, 28).

That ''theatre of the countersignature'' animates queer theory's methodological refusal to reinforce the convenient formula for homosexuality as marginal or ''merely transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis a proper, natural sexuality'' because we know that desire operates far more inchoately—or, at the very least, as Teresa de Lauretis explains, because we recognize that we ''do not know much about one another's sexual history ... or modes of theorizing [about it]'' (Derrida 2004, 28; see de Lauretis 1991, iii, viii). Questioning sexual essentialism deflates the ethnoscientific categories we have, like *homosexual* and *heterosexual*, which do little more than contribute to a climate of sex guilt (Rubin 1993). As the spread of and reaction to HIV in the United States has demonstrated horrifically, these words do not match always the everyday practice of sexual autonomy. Queer theory's misgivings for hasty sexual understandings inspires its own brand of progressive reactionism, even by scholars otherwise furthering sexuality studies; such as David Halperin who remarks that, despite some healthy coalition work it inspired, queer theory's intended provocation amounts to little more than the ''portentous—weighty yet vaporous—significations'' of ''some sort of advanced, postmodern identity'' (Halperin 2003, 339, 340). For Halperin, queer theory's ''hypothetical knowledge-practice not yet in existence'' never stood erect in ''its anti-assimilationist posture'' or displayed ''its shocking embrace of the abnormal and the marginal'' because it was so easily ''folded back into the standard practice of literary and cultural studies'' (2003, 341). Like deconstruction, Halperin asserts, queer theory lost its power with its publicity, upon its dissemination across academia, and with the utility it can command for those who do not engage demonstrably with ''queer culture or queer studies'' (2003, 343). Only by ''preserving [queer theory's] critical, or queer, dimensions'' can it be saved (Halperin 2003, 343).

This fear that intellectual consumption works like food—the more someone eats, the less remains—suggests a nostalgia for a time when ''queering'' was not so commonplace. The same kind of nostalgia attends depictions of Michael disheveled, hapless, and vacant on that Santa Maria sidewalk. Narratives of the pajamas, the face, and the trial all begin with an earlier magical Michael Jackson™ not disgraced by his implicit guilt. This remembered Michael Jackson™ displays the ''nostalgia for unmediated representation'' that indicates, for Jacqueline Rose (1986, 117), an argument about visual perception troubled by assumptions about public access to the psyche. If there can be some past, pure affiliation between an interlocutor and an image, there stands as well an idealized unconscious beyond the (therefore) false image of it. That kind of schizophrenic split can either evacuate someone maligned or nourish a radically disruptive self-reflexivity that ''foregrounds the indeterminacy of the linguistic and/or visual sign'' and works like ''a return to a constructivist ethic'' (Rose 1986, 118). As I demonstrate the overwhelming critical manufacture of Michael with the former evacuation, I want to make equally clear that my redress does not subscribe to the latter indeterminate process. In Michael Jackson™ I assert an

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admixture that refuses to settle or remove itself from the question of representation as an awkward or deliberate failure. The black vernacular mechanics of Michael Jackson™ engage in the kind of juxtaposition that Rose finds powerful in *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), in which the mutual representation of race and sexual politics presents "a story to be told alongside the radical distrust and undoing of the possibility of the story" (Rose 1986, 125). In the case of Michael Jackson™ that narrative distrust remains skeptical about Michael's sartorial style on the planned day his accuser would testify to the alleged sexual interaction at rather intimate "pajama parties." Despite that anxiety, Michael's clothing choice that day remains a worthy Rorschach inkblot, the meaning of which incites insatiable narration and interpretation. The image divulges and obscures. It demonstrates the deconstruction dynamic that imagines neither "a *non-place* nor an *other* world, neither a utopia nor an alibi" (Derrida 1978, 8). Or, as Derrida explains: "by never saying enough, I also say too much" (1978, 9).

We Are the Weird: Michael Jackson™'s Pajamas

> The greatest humbug of all is the man who believes—or pretends to believe —that everything and everybody are humbugs. (Barnum, 1866)

Before Michael arrives to court late and pajama-clad on 10 March 2005, shaky helicopter footage tries to focus on Michael's approaching entourage, still miles away from the courthouse yet. It complements the speculation that excited TV pundits trade about him being "at Cottage Hospital in Santa Ynez with a serious back problem," as defense lawyer Thomas Mesereau accounts for Michael's absence at 8:30 a.m. to Superior Court Judge Rodney S. Melville (quoted in Orth 2005, 83). That courtroom moment comes packaged along with the "sinister parts of [the defense] that were designed to influence the jury without their knowledge" in Maureen Orth's July 2005 installment of her 12-year series "chronicling Jackson's downward spiral" for *Vanity Fair* (Orth 2005, 82). According to Orth, the usually "mild-mannered" Judge Melville "snapped" his response to Mesereau's explanation: " 'I'm going to issue a warrant for his arrest, I'm forfeiting his bail. . . . I'm going to hold that order for an hour.' Then he swept out as jaws dropped all over the courtroom" (Orth 2005, 83). Equally agape were the scrambling figures outside, as *The Washington Post* describes the frenzied scene that shaped instantaneously the tone of television coverage that day: "reporters and photographers scurrying breathlessly about the courthouse grounds and shouting into cell phones in a variety of languages, while cable television channels immediately put up 'deadline clocks' to see if the singer, who was taken to a hospital 35 miles away in Solvang, would make it to court in time" (Stuever 2005, C1–C2). Orth indicates her own privileged location within the fray: "Outside, I was near enough to Mesereau to overhear him repeat agitatedly on his cell phone, 'Michael, you've got to get here *now*!' " (Orth 2005, 83).

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The undeniable drama of Michael's delayed attendance to his own trial re-animated trial coverage that could relay only indirectly events in a courtroom barred to any recording device. It justified the usual Michael speculation that the host of the then-new legal conjecture-fest *Nancy Grace* on CNN Headline News needed. Michael in pajamas makes good TV. No matter how graphic, Michael's young accuser's account of masturbation could not compete. Grace herself ditches the testimony analysis that her psychotherapist guest starts once she discovers (at the advice of a viewer's e-mail, she admits, and after watching the footage again onscreen, as her guest talks) that Michael interrupts his "tippy-toe, tippy-toe" limp when "he whips around to shoot a peace sign [to fans]" (Nancy Grace 2005). More important than the psychotherapist's authority on pedophile behavior is the answer to the rather erudite question she poses: "Is he a big faker?" (Nancy Grace 2005).

Pundits relish the gawky stance on a Santa Maria sidewalk they presume to watch with quizzical remove. The "pajama incident" calls attention to Michael so successfully that his deliberate role as catalyst vanishes in plain sight. That collective erasure by invested yet ambivalent Michael-interlocutors finds a synecdoche in Michael's face for a "freakish body [that] represents the struggle of fantasy against reality," as Terry Eagleton recoils at Michael's "over-chiseled nose" (Eagleton 2005, 24). For Eagleton, Michael's body matches all too perfectly and tragically a trial that "blurs the distinction between fact and fiction" and corrodes ethics into aesthetics (2005, 24). Despite Eagleton's nihilistic dismissal of celebrity trials as "media spectaculars thronged with characters who are doubtfully real," however, he engages in his own suspicious theatrics (Eagleton 2005, 24). His interpretation of Michael's changed face and "freakish body" has less to do with Michael Jackson™ than it does with his foregone conclusion that an amoral celebrity culture has unmoored not just California state law, but also our fundamental human bearings. This logic requires the fantasy that Michael's re-sculpting has obscured irretrievably any public knowledge of the star's black racial identity. Like so many academics and journalists, Eagleton asserts: "Quite a few young people are not even aware that he is black" (2005, 24). Or, as Joan Kron argues in an *Allure* magazine exposé on the plastic surgery Michael refuses to acknowledge: "He has erased virtually all signs of age, gender, and ethnic identity" (Kron 1996, 117). In that fleshly *tabula rasa*, Jean Baudrillard finds a "solitary mutant" that suggests not just a "race to end all races," but also "the demise of desire, a pell-mell diffusion of erotic simulacra in every guise, of transsexual kitsch in all its glory. A postmodern pornography, if you will, where sexuality is lost in the theatrical excess of its ambiguity" (Baudrillard 1993, 21, 22).

In Michael Jackson™ contradictions teem. Somehow, sexuality evaporates in a man who proclaims "the most loving thing to do is share your bed with someone"—a *someone* who always seems to be one of a set of "handsome preteen boys with dark hair and eyes" who all look like "they could be cousins or even brothers," according to Maureen Orth (quoted in Orth 2005, 82, 134). Race manages to fade in the wake of a flood of photographs and footage documenting a

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"17-year transformation [that] has given new meaning to the word 'makeover' " (Kron 1996, 117). Yet, like the career-spanning clip reels that follow anyone talking about Michael Jackson™ on camera, the snapshot timeline that *Allure* arranges for Joan Kron's article makes Michael's genetic status *all the more present*. The multiplicity of images for Michael Jackson™ demonstrates how any one of them can only inadequately represent the man whose life we know—and he remembers—as a career (Jackson 1988, 6). To know Michael Jackson™ requires a history, a facility with comparison. Michael Jackson™ remains always in play. *How can* we forget any detail of a "King of Pop," however mocked, who commands so much air time, layout, and bandwidth? *How can we*, when what we presume to know about Michael now—through two publicly adjudicated cases of child molestation ending in one trial and an acquittal; through a marriage to Elvis Presley's daughter so cynically received that only Lisa Marie seemed to believe in it, as she confesses to Oprah Winfrey onscreen on 28 March 2005; or through three children who do not look genetically his—seems to have been present all along?

The conniving game of Frisbee in which I participate with Michael in order to explicate threatens still—perhaps more so after Michael's acquittal. About the verdict, Libby Copeland surmises, "Michael Jackson is now free to be everything that makes us so uneasy, free to resume sleepovers with whomever he likes at his earliest convenience" (2005, C1). More disturbing is the lack of closure the adjudication provides: "What's it all mean? The decision is rendered but we're no wiser. . . . An acquittal doesn't clear his name; it only muddies the waters" (Copeland 2005, C1). There remains a certain dirtiness in pursuing Michael Jackson™ and *not* condemning a miscarriage of justice or rendering him self-deluded, drug-addicted, and corrupted by "a particular combination of wealth and celebrity [that] festers and goes bad"—as if that is the only story to be assembled from the phenomenon who has grown up, not simply more weird, in front of us (Copeland 2005, C2; see also Dimond 2005). My own close attention to another story Michael helps present has made me legible in the Michael Jackson™ discourse, usually with the kind of juxtaposition with which Libby Copeland acknowledges by calling me "a lecturer at Yale and a Jackson junkie who last year organized a scholarly conference on the singer" (2005, C2). That other story—Michael's interest in P.T. Barnum—has been available since the publication of J. Randy Taraborrelli's unauthorized biography *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (Taraborrelli 1991). Taraborrelli provides no specific date in 1985 when Michael gives a copy of a P.T. Barnum biography to his manager Frank DiLeo and lawyer John Branca to explain, but does include the following quote he attributes to Michael: "This is going to be my bible and I want it to be yours. . . . I want my whole career to be the greatest show on earth" (Taraborrelli 1991, 433). Since Michael read about Barnum, he has facilitated humbug exploits that put into play the productive pleasures of doubt and suspicion that Barnum modeled, according to Neil Harris: "Experiencing a complicated hoax was pleasurable because of the competition between victim and hoaxer, each seeking to outmaneuver the other, to catch him off-balance and detect the critical weakness" (Harris 1973, 77).

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Michael's first "post-Barnum" hoax came with the 16 September 1986 *National Enquirer* cover story proclaiming he sleeps in a hyperbaric chamber so he can live to be 150 years old. Replete with doctored pictures and a manufactured feud between Michael and his then manager, Frank DiLeo, that story excited *Enquirer* reporter Charles Montgomery, who "didn't know [it] was a fake" at the time, and sparked "a perfectly orchestrated public relations coup" (quoted in Taraborrelli 1991, 433, 436). Michael was thrilled with the unilateral acceptance of the hoax as well as the questions it raised, like the following, and now perennial, one *Newsweek* poses in its 29 September 1986 edition: "Has Michael Jackson finally gone off the deep end?" (Hackett 1986, 71). To Taraborrelli, Michael demonstrates just how far he is from drowning in the hype he handles. Michael relishes this orchestration: "I can't believe that [the media] bought it. ... It's like I can tell the press anything about me and they'll buy it. We can actually *control* the press. I think this is an important breakthrough for us" (quoted in Taraborrelli 1991, 436). It was one Michael proved again with coverage that started 30 May 1987, three months before the release of *Bad*. On that day in *The Washington Post*, among other news outlets reporting the scheme, Frank DiLeo explains that Michael has submitted a bid to buy the preserved body of John Merrick, the Englishman dead since 1900 from neurofibromatosis, known as "The Elephant Man," and kept still at the London Hospital Medical Center (Mulligan 1987, C3). This press release proved true only after the media contacted the hospital for comment, after which Michael extended an offer of one million dollars, doubling it a couple of weeks later for dramatic flourish. Michael's passing interest in actually owning Merrick's body belies Michael's identification with him as a fellow misfit. Sister LaToya recalls Michael being "emotional over any form of human suffering [including] freaks such as the Elephant Man, [and] crying no matter how many times he sees David Lynch's film about John Merrick" (Jackson 1991, 90). She considers the "pretty obvious" reason Michael empathized with Merrick: "celebrityhood turns you into a bit of a freak (in other people's eyes, that is)" (Jackson 1991, 90). In Michael's concern for "how hard it must have been to be stared at wherever they went, taunted, and to be considered so different from normal people," LaToya sees Michael's "condition" (Jackson 1991, 90).

A protective sister rehearses the usual story of Michael victimized by an intruding fame, but also provides details to regard Michael's self-fashioning situated amid the tabloids' colorful newsprint. She points to the façade of his public presentation, but finds the media misunderstanding him rather than Michael misleading them: "People often misread Michael's soft-spoken, shy demeanor as lack of confidence. Hardly. My brother is the most self-assured person I know" (Jackson 1991, 82). Also, she explains that "Michael saves everything, and I do mean everything"—and that he is a voracious reader: "Michael's bedroom walls were filled with hundreds of books on different subjects, but especially philosophy and biography. He's probably read about every great artist, businessman, and inventor that ever was, posing questions afterward" (Jackson 1991, 84, 88). Michael's inquisitive attraction to the

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combination of art, commerce, and invention takes a particular turn—and requires LaToya's additional defense of his "unusually pure" perspective, his "extremely sensitive soul"—after the infamous Pepsi commercial (Jackson 1991, 88, 90). LaToya clarifies: "Following his recovery from a badly burned scalp in 1984, he grew fascinated with how the body heals itself and received permission from some doctors to don surgical gown and mask and observe several operations" (Jackson 1991, 89). Another doctor gave him a brain he saved in his bathroom, what LaToya calls "the picked grey mass floating in formaldehyde" (Jackson 1991, 89). His anatomic interest—"to Michael, the brain and the body are simply miraculous creations"—developed quickly into one for marketing bodily abnormality and malady (Jackson 1991, 89–90). Well-read Michael intuits and channels what facilitates popular interest in a spectacular freak, a character in a situated social fuss larger that he represents by synecdoche.

Michael's tabloid command facilitates "the cardinal principle of enfreakment" that Rosemarie Garland Thomson identifies as the body enveloping "the freak's potential humanity" so that the flesh itself "becomes pure text" to be articulated and debated (Thomson 1997, 59). Michael's "elephant" interests exaggerated what we already knew and loved about him, the "impish delight" that Jim Miller finds in *Thriller*'s "offbeat lyrics that hint at Michael's own secret world of dreams and demons" (Miller 1983, 53). In the context of Michael's ongoing body stunts, the hyperbaric chamber and the Merrick bid proved our interest in his exceptional difference. They set the stage for Michael's repeated performances of illness that "make a play for sympathy," according to Bob Jones (2005, 72), the head of the communications and media division of MJJ Productions from 1987 to 2004. Jones reveals that Michael faked a broken leg at the 2001 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ceremony to avoid the expected jam session with other inductees, and that Michael performed "Remember the Time" from a wheelchair at *The Soul Train Music Awards* on 9 March 2003 because "he neither rehearsed nor prepared properly" for the show (Jones 2005, 73). Well before these ruses, Michael learned the marketing potential of accidental injury with his Pepsi commercial scalp burning. Then, Michael told ambulance attendants to "leave the glove on," the white rhinestone one he wore when filming, because "the media is here" (Taraborrelli 1991, 331).

However fake or marketed Michael's injuries may be, they build upon a longstanding technique of stardom rooted in verisimilar deception. I use *technique* here in the spirit of Marcel Mauss' corporeal attention to social idiosyncrasy that frames "the art of using the human body, [and reveals] the facts of *education*" in these gestures that may seem merely miscellaneous (Mauss 1992, 459). For Mauss, bodily *techniques* do not come easily: any "manual knack can only be learned slowly" (1992, 457). Thus, they display a "prestigious imitation" of a tradition set already: "they are not simply a product of some purely individual, almost completely psychic, arrangements and mechanisms" (Mauss 1992, 459, 458). In Michael's augmentation of his awaited reception for "the media [that] is here," as he said reportedly with a burnt scalp, I see a manual knack that Michael has been developing since *The Wiz* and *Off the*

Wall—what journalist Gerri Hirshey calls "pop celebrity's most striking and controversial makeover" (Hirshey 2001, 85). Hirshey had access to Michael in 1982, when "Michael was so intensely focused on completing his solo transformation" with his then-upcoming *Thriller*, when Steven Spielberg assessed Michael's savvy: "He's in full control. Sometimes he appears to other people to be sort of wavering on the fringes of twilight, but there is great conscious forethought behind everything he does" (Hirshey 2001, 83, 84).

However dismayed Bob Jones may be about being once "too naïve to realize to what lengths Michael would go to manipulate any given situation while attracting attention," Michael's "prestigious imitation" of whatever accident, real or imagined, befalls him rehearses the deception with which IMP studio head Carl Laemmle established the first identifiable movie star, Florence Lawrence, in March 1910 (Jones 2005, 73). Before Lawrence, movie actors were anonymous, almost-ghostlike figures who made filmgoers question the veracity of reality presented in early "life-pictures," named as such because the majority of movies released before 1905 consisted of documentary footage (Barbas 2001). Lawrence herself was known first as "The Biograph Girl" because of the studio she worked for before Laemmle hired her to promote IMP films. Shortly after he did, he staged her public debut first by identifying her only as "Miss Lawrence" in two movie adverts (29 January and 5 March 1910), then by facilitating reports that she had died in a streetcar accident in St Louis—an odd accident for a working actor living in New York (Dick 1997, 29). Almost immediately, Laemmle dispelled this rumor himself in a 12 March advertisement, in which he explained that "Miss Lawrence ... is in the best of health, [and] will continue to appear in 'IMP' films" (Dick 1997, 29). The revelation of the stunt—the 2 April issue of *Moving Picture World* calls Lawrence "a clever girl ... worthy of the attention she has attracted" through it—only intensified public investment in the mechanics of stardom (Dick 1997, 30).

Similar admiration informs the articles that attend to Michael's "carefully calculated" album launches—"as cannily choreographed as his famous moonwalk," says Dana Kennedy—even when sarcasm presumes to evoke objectivity (Kennedy 1995, 24). Laments over a "showbiz amorality" that keep Michael center stage do not deter Michael coverage, after all. They serve as more than a testament to a Michael Jackson™'s lingering allure; they facilitate its circulation while ignoring its history (Kennedy 1995, 25). Bill Brioux understands these mechanics when he resolves sarcastically in a *Toronto Sun* piece about the infamous pajama procession that "the sight of Michael Jackson shuffling off to court in his jimmies" excited non-stop coverage: "TV can't wait to catch this guy with his pants down" (Brioux 2005, 6). So does Edwin Diamond in "We Are the Weird," a *New York* magazine article published shortly after the 1993 molestation allegations broke. Diamond understands the reach of media complicity in the presentation of Michael Jackson™ that Michael wanted: "Whatever the outcome, the fingerprints of one culprit are already on this sordid story. The press, mainstream and tab, high and low, helped in the creation of the character named 'Michael Jackson.' For years, the press went along with the loveable,

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androgynous fantasy dreamed up by a knowing publicity machine'' (Diamond 1993, 28). As I demonstrate in the next section, however, presenting Michael Jackson™ in *Black or White* dissembles as well as conveys that crowd-pleasing fantasy.

The Uncanny Vision of and ''Fairy'' Moves in *Black or White*

> ''Black or White'' is apparently meant to reaffirm Mr. Jackson's worldwide importance, to make his new single seem somehow rebellious, and to make his image tougher, more streetwise. But in its mixture of calculation and peculiarity, there's more to it than that. (Pareles 1991, 9)

Almost too quickly, hours after *Black or White*'s worldwide debut on 14 November 1991, Michael expresses his regret about the scandal caused by, as *The Toronto Star* explains, ''a four-minute dance sequence in which the elfin superstar rubs his crotch and violently smashes a car'' (van Rijn 1991, A1). Via an official statement, Michael promises to excise the four-minute, 30-second finale of *Black or White*, during which he dances without music: ''It upsets me to think that 'Black or White' could influence any child or adult to destructive behavior, either sexual or violent'' (quoted in Pareles 1991, 9). Carl Laemmle and P.T. Barnum would have been proud of such orchestrated hubbub in front of an unprecedented audience. *Black or White* debuted simultaneously in the United States on MTV, Fox, and Black Entertainment Television, as well as globally across 26 other countries. The video's reported audience totaled 500 million (van Rijn 1991, A1).

Its auspicious airing re-introduced Michael, not simply because he had dropped from the public eye after promoting *Bad*, but because *Dangerous* was his first adult solo project without Quincy Jones, the producer whom Michael felt received too many accolades for Michael's success (Jones 2005, 49; Taraborrelli 1991, 414–416). So, Michael reconfigured himself with *Black or White*'s deliberate design. The video's narrative revised the comfortably weird celebrity we thought we knew already with a poststructuralist flair by *erasing*, or rendering no longer serviceable, heretofore safe images of his celebrity. In *Black or White*, I see a deliberate Derridean dissonance, a ''double writing'' of Michael himself ''thereby disorganizing the entire inherited order'' promoted at least up until then with the crossover star's exceptional biography (Derrida 1981, 42). But *Black or White*'s method is not so singular from Michael's knack at revealing the suturing we have had to perform to find him ''safe-as-milk,'' as Ken Tucker finds the *Dangerous* album over a year after *Black or White*'s debut (Tucker 1993, 18). Even Tucker cannot maintain Michael's reportedly bland character. In an article published almost six months before reports of the first child-molestation allegations, Tucker admits ''it's also impossible to deny the creepy subtext of a 34-year-old, crotch-grabbing, *Dangerous* guy who says he most likes to hang out with 'animals and children' '' (1993, 21). That contradiction—a creepy yet

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''safe-as-milk'' subtext hardly so clandestine—comes ever more conspicuously through *Black or White* with a manner that D.A. Miller calls an ''open secret,'' or the oxymoronic ''double bind of a secrecy that must always be rigorously maintained in the face of a secret that everybody already knows'' (Miller 1988, 195).

Black or White divides itself twice, first with the video's narrative framing and then with its double enactment of the single it promotes. Here, I discuss only the video's center, two inverse segments—one with, one without, the single. Emphasizing their collaborative mirror method is their running time: each segment clocks exactly four minutes, 30 seconds. This double-take contradicts the simple plea for racial harmony that, as many presume, fuels the clip's melodic segment, its first-half rendition of the kind of humanism associated with Michael, particularly after his *USA for Africa* single, ''We Are the World'' (1985). Michael dancing in *Black or White*'s first half among West Africans, Native Americans, Russians, Indonesians, and others, who themselves shift from local moves to Michael-dancing along with him, culminates with a face-morphing. This higher-tech version of a computer technique used first by duo Godley and Crème in their video for ''Cry'' (1985) levels legible racial difference with physiognomic fluidity. Faces blending across races and ethnicities reveal how much a façade our epidermal differences are—all while those faces lip-synch in unison the words ''*it's black, it's white*'' from the song's final chorus. Then, ''with the song out of the way,'' as Jon Pareles notes, ''the true oddness begins''—or, what I see as the video's de-familiarizing technique (1991, 9). The camera pulls away from the final lip-synching person the morphing chorus becomes, a black woman, to reveal *Black or White*'s director John Landis approaching her, asking incredulously, ''*How did you do that*?'' In the corner of the screen, a black panther wanders. The camera follows it down a flight a stairs, where it morphs into a Michael apart from the one selling the single. *This* Michael dances a far more provocative solo routine, spatially below the rosy multiculturalism performed as a jingle. Apart from the single's marketed lyrics, this *other* Michael's body monologue reveals what lies underneath, literally and figuratively, a technologically enhanced representative equality: fear and rage.

So stark is the contrast between these two Michaels presented here because Michael Joseph Jackson's extraordinary biography, including his ''entirely unprecedented and gargantuan fame'' as well as the outrageous wealth his crossover success has generated over four decades, signifies the very possibility —*and fantasy*—that we live in the world that *Black or White*'s first song-segment represents (Wallace 1990, 78). Of course, everyday folk cannot breeze past physiognomic difference as easily as *Black or White*'s morphing chorus does. Nor can they bypass the social, political, and economic histories for their legibly different bodies. Neither can Michael. At the same time, Michael Jackson™'s crossover celebrity testifies, in part, to a collective investment in that fancy. *Black or White* Michael presents a discordant collision that tabloids, dailies, and even fashion magazines find only in mortal chronologies of Michael's corroding face, each awaiting an answer to the question a 3 December 2002 *Globe* cover story asks: ''Is Michael Jackson dying?'' (Rodack and Allison 2003, 24). The

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funereal response to the racial deterioration that some see in ''his decomposing nose badly discolored and taped-up from years of plastic surgery'' works to regulate Michael, to control his freakish transgressions with a neat and terminal ending to corporeal shifting (Rodack and Allison 2003, 24). Of course, Michael's body choices could inspire a provocative forum on black racial aesthetics in a multicultural society. Instead, the anxiety that Michael's figure generates discourages any significant dialogue *in lieu* of jokes that expose the blinding command of racial essentialism. For example, a 17 November 1991 *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* masthead editorial about *Black or White* engages in the *de rigeur* racial impossibility that burdens so much Michael commentary: ''Michael Jackson, in his newest music video, lays to rest forever the notion that white people can't dance. He dances quite well.'' Or, as Joan Kron asserts in an *Allure* magazine spread about Michael's evolving look: ''He has become, in a way, a member of a new race: The Michael Jackson race. So far it is a race of one'' (Kron 1996, 117–119). So threatening is Michael's surgery, his flesh becomes kaleidoscopic. As Libby Copeland opines in *The Washington Post*: ''He is a black man who looks like a white woman, or maybe an Asian woman, or maybe an alien'' (2005, C2). Quixotically paranormal, his ''face looks as if it's made from puzzle pieces that weren't meant to fit together'' (Copeland 2005, C2). However clever reporters can be when writing about the obvious, they deny their own knowledge of what they need to mock and therefore contain. How exactly can an almost hyper-visible star remove his social identity legibility so completely with (alleged) cuts, tucks, implants, and bleach?

Moreover, Michael's verisimilar self-presentation in videos such as *Black or White* draws directly from the ''rich black heritage that gave him his musical and dance styles'' that *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* editors see Michael jettisoning. *Black or White*'s doubling take on its promoted single performs the poststructuralist move that Barbara Foley identifies as *feigning* in black literary technique, or the act of ''deliberately tantalizing the reader's intuition ... with assurances that an implausible (if not indeed patently false) event or series of events is true'' (Foley 1980, 397). Such tactical indirection shapes a longstanding tradition of black vernacular performance blurring fact with fiction that Lawrence Levine (1978) follows in the narratives and semantics of antebellum black folklore. The pursuit of that ''oral tradition,'' as Michele Wallace explains, ''has been precisely a postmodern one inevitably inscribing (and inscribed by) our absence from history, the dead-end meaninglessness of the signifiers, 'equality,' 'freedom,' and 'justice' '' (1990, 78). The fear and rage Michael performs at *Black or White*'s close enacts the inscribing process Foley and Wallace describe—one Jacques Derrida would call *countersignature*—not by evacuating all meaning from the ''equality,'' ''freedom,'' and ''justice'' that Michael Jackson™ represents, but by promoting the uncanny effect of the video's double-take on the single it promotes, first by a rendition of its melody, then by a bodily monologue accompanied only by yelps and sound effects. Read together, both sections abut visually with the method Jacqueline Rose admires, when ''a story [can] be told alongside the radical distrust and undoing of the possibility of

[the] story [itself]'' (Rose 1986, 125). Or, as Sigmund Freud explains, the power such ''commensurate anxiety'' promotes through ''the idea of the 'double' (the *Doppelgänger*)'' intensifies only when the relationship between people who look alike unsettles either person's ''true self'' (Freud 2003, 141, 142). Like Derrida's countersignature and D.A. Miller's ''open secret,'' the ''secret significance'' that Freud's uncanny doppelgänger reveals ''is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed'' (Derrida 2003, 148). So, *Black or White* illustrates the *knowledge*—not the shock—that presenting Michael Jackson™ requires. More than the ''riot of derivativeness, a kind of random replay of commercial and movie images'' that Jon Pareles finds, *Black or White* reveals what has been ''long familiar'' to anyone regarding Michael Jackson™. Fred Astaire attests to an energy that once seemed to contradict the *Thriller*-era ''creature of sweet sensuality, beguiling, angelic, androgynous'' when he tells Michael the following after watching him perform ''Billie Jean'' on the *Motown 25* broadcast in May 1983: ''You're a hell of a mover. ... You're an angry dancer'' (Miller 1983, 52; quoted in Jackson 1988, 213).

Michael's penultimate corporeal display in *Black or White*'s melodic-bereft routine amplifies that skillful aggression. Michael dances on what looks like a neglected city street. Masturbatory gyrating fades into the step dancing typical of black sororities and fraternities. Fifteen shots frame this association and pace themselves when Michael grinds. Bathed in blue light, Michael spins then traces the length of his torso to punctuate the rhythm only in his head, complemented for us by sound effects. The camera strokes forward three times, as it does nowhere else in the short film. Cuts dissolve. Michael's body moves like montage. With eyelids and lips parted slightly, he breathes unevenly, jerks his pelvis, and sways his hips into the typical stomp and clap of aligned pledging that Elizabeth Fine characterizes as a ''ritual performance of group identity'' (1991, 40). For Fine, stepping signifies promiscuously, associating ''various combinations of singing, speaking, chanting, and synchronized movement'' in order to express ''spirit, style, icons, and unity'' in a public forum (Fine 1991, 40). So does *Black or White*. Michael's sexual stepping in its second half exemplifies the short film's usually overlooked method that presents Michael Jackson™. Stepping's specific assemblage, what anthropologists call a *syncretized process*, works not to produce an indifferent collage of discontinuous scraps that some would mistake as postmodern. Nor does stepping produce a neat genealogy from African authenticity to US-American adaptation. Syncretizing borrows strategically and transforms cross-racially, sometimes through satire or parody, in a particularly black fashion that rejects the trappings of the ''good racial subject.'' In its very dynamism, it implies the kind of agency I find in Michael, in and alongside *Black or White*. With syncretic stepping, Michael illustrates how fraternal, sororial ritual expresses itself sexually, how race and sex intermingle in conspicuously erotic gestures. In a routine arousing intuitive improvization, his stepping choreography punctuates significantly his autoerotic rapture. Perhaps not so oddly, the earliest written reference to stepping in the *Hilltop*, Howard

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University's student newspaper, locates its draw in the rhythmic seduction Michael enacts. In a 25 November 1925 article entitled "Hell-Week," Van Taylor questions the strangely effeminate "desire [of] young men, stalwart of frame, and rugged of heart and mind, demurely and aesthetically to dance about the campus as if in time to the fairy Pipes of Pan" (quoted in Fine 2003, 15).

Michael's *Black or White* reiteration of this "fairy" disconnection while looking "as fragile, even feminine, as ever," according to Jon Pareles, sparked quizzical reviews that reveal exactly the Michael Jackson™ they purport to misapprehend (Pareles 1991, 9). Exemplary in this regard is Gary Dauphin's *Village Voice* review, which claims that "Michael Jackson is through" because *Black or White*'s disjointed form reveals "Michael's inability to get the visual history of his own body right" (Dauphin 1991, 51). Like many others, Dauphin identifies Michael's differently axiomatic racial and sexual presence, a display that suggests rather than settles, but cannot entertain Michael deliberate muddling. According to Dauphin, Michael has a death "drive to erase history's markers from everything around him, *including his own body*" (1991, 51). Michael's plastic surgery and color adjustment show with flesh Michael's "long steady effacement of the black parts of a black life" (Dauphin 1991, 51). For Dauphin, "another black man," Michael's volitional refiguring threatens sexually as well (1991, 51). Dauphin's fear aggrandizes a hyperbolic "anxiety about the scalpel ... each time [Michael] grabs that bulgeless crotch" as well as a defensive claim that Dauphin does not "fear [Michael's] clumsy stab at androgyny" (1991, 51). Like Van Taylor's 1925 reaction to otherwise stalwart black men prancing "demurely and aesthetically" to fairy pipes, Dauphin's assessment of Michael's racial effacement doing "those ancient dance steps [while] jerking, wailing, gasping, and shaking [like he is in] the throes of violent death" depends upon an authentic black racial ontology not diluted by any syncretized process or performance, particularly one that would undercut a presumptively *heterosexual* black masculinity (Dauphin 1991, 51–52).

Cynthia Fuchs finds a similar "problem" in the "ambiguous status" of Michael's penis, or in "the representational space where this penis *should be*," even though she otherwise celebrates the countersignature Michael performs: "a show which resists normalization as it ironically observes it, exposing the seams of the display" (Fuchs 1995, 16, 22). Fuchs appreciates the history of representation Michael Jackson™ keeps in play: "Whenever he appears in public—say, on stage for 'Motown 25,' on television with Oprah Winfrey for their momentous interview, in Monte Carlo at the 1993 World Music Awards—his history is recounted through video imagery, reconfirming that his body is the site of a visibly changing identity, an effect of erasure, repetition, and resurrection" (Fuchs 1995, 17). With the omnipresent clip reel, Michael's body remains "quite incapable of ... forgetting" his all-too-public racial and sexual history, in all of its seemingly contradictory articulations (Fuchs 1995, 17). Somehow Michael's penis troubles the memory his "performative instability" fosters with an irreconcilable lack (Fuchs 1995, 18). Fuchs does trouble her own "problem" with Michael's penis by suggesting that he remains more useful "as a means to

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think through the cultural split-self created by the intersections of audiences, social forces, and political mechanisms that construct and contest Michael Jackson'' (1995, 16). Still, she begins her essay entitled ''Michael Jackson's Penis'' with the ''problem'' of its ''absence,'' and interprets that ''lack'' as an allegory for Michael's supposed transsexual identity (Fuchs 1995, 16–18). Not only does this hasty sexual understanding signal a progressive reactionism that runs counter to the materialist premise Michael Jackson™ fosters, it has to forget the veritable onslaught of references to Michael's penis—not only in the dismissive reactions to *Black or White*, in which ''the elfin superstar rubs his crotch'' (van Rijn 1991, A1). I close with three penis references—two that suggest Michael's, and another whose deceptive presence onstage he admires—to signal again how the very materiality of the body produces the wrenching re-contextualization that deconstruction, queer theory, and Michael Jackson™ make possible through ''another [kind of] writing [about] the question of Being or meaning'' (Derrida 1995, 212). As Judith Butler argues with *Undoing Gender*, such practices that refuse the convenient protocols of any expected ''reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone'' (Butler 2004, 29). The body remains in play. So do the penis references I offer here. They indicate, as Gayle Rubin asserts in her foundational ''Thinking Sex'' essay, just how the ''sexual acts [they could suggest remain] burdened with an excess of significance'' (Rubin 1993, 11).

Presenting Michael Jackson™'s Genitalia

> Michael is circumcised. He has short pubic hair. His testicles are marked with pink and brown marks. Like a cow, not white but pink color. His body oil stink. He has brown patches on his ass, on his left glut. (Jordon Chandler's description of Michael Jackson's genitalia, quoted in Gutierrez 1997)

As indelible in Michael Jackson™ discourse as Michael's Santa Maria pajamas is the blood-red dress shirt he wears reading a statement sent via satellite from Neverland Ranch on 22 December 1993. He talks about the then-soon-to-be-settled-out-of-court case of *Jordan Chandler v. Michael Joseph Jackson*. The shirt makes his make-up-heavy face all-the-more-strikingly pale. His gaunt pose complements the ''dehumanizing and humiliating examination'' he narrates, when they could ''view and photograph my body including my penis, my buttocks, my lower torso, [and] thighs [to look for] any discoloration, spotting, blemishes or any other evidence of a skin disorder called vitiligo'' (quoted in Weinraub 1993, A12). Here, like he does with pajama bottoms billowing in the Central-Californian breeze, Michael peddles the knowing indirection we expect already from him—one that keeps him center stage, so to speak, with us

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deciphering, deliberating, and comparing the information we have with what we see now before us. Already by December, the revelation Michael made 10 months earlier on a live primetime interview with Oprah Winfrey ''that his light skin was the result of a disorder, not intentional bleaching,'' had generated tabloid speculation about the veracity of Michael's claim (Kolata 1993, 7). Even *The New York Times* news story about Michael's assertion seems to suggest something else at play with the following: '' 'Mr. Jackson has requested that I make this statement,' The Associated Press quoted the dermatologist, Dr. Arnold Klein, as saying. 'It is not contagious and is a result of the loss of pigment producing cells of the skin' '' (quoted in Kolata 1993, 7). The indirect quotation points away from even the *Times* claiming any authenticity.

So does Michael when he mentions vitiligo during his statement via satellite. He knew then, as well as during the negotiations around the December 1993 warrant to photograph him naked, that police were looking for evidence of Jordan Chandler's description of the blotchy ''pink and brown marks'' on Michael's testicles that look ''like a cow'' (quoted in Gutierrez 1997, 159). Vitiligo was Michael Jackson™'s publicity decoy that generated and diverted attention while it offered his body as an unlucky victim to a rare and ''ancient disease'' that remains productively ambiguous, since ''researchers still do not know its cause'' (Kolata 1993, 7). As Dave Marsh explains, ''Michael is not a person who doesn't want attention. What he craves is not privacy, but lack of exposure'' (quoted in Kennedy 1993, 27). Here, Michael Jackson™'s vitiligo works to cast Michael as another kind of visual victim of police cameras while Michael Jackson™ takes control of the dissemination of investigation information.

Such skill with revelation Michael first admired as a child. In his autobiography *Moonwalk*, he explains: ''I received quite an education as a child. More than most. Perhaps this freed me to concentrate on other aspects of my life as an adult'' (Jackson 1988, 39). One important lesson came when he was ''nine or ten'' and performing in clubs (Jackson 1988, 38). He remembers ''this one place in Chicago'' because there was a stripper named Mary Rose: ''This girl would take off her clothes and her panties and throw them to the audience. The men would pick them up and sniff them and yell. My brothers and I would be watching all this, taking it in, and my father wouldn't mind. We were exposed to a lot doing that kind of circuit'' (Jackson 1988, 38). But this did not titillate Michael the way another performance did at the Apollo Theater in New York, what he calls ''something that really blew me away because I didn't know things like that existed,'' and evidence that he ''received quite an education as a child'' (Jackson 1988, 38, 39). I let Michael tell it:

> I had seen quite a few strippers, but that night this one girl with gorgeous eyelashes and long hair came out and did her routine. She put on a *great* performance. All of a sudden, at the end, she took off her wig, pulled a pair of big oranges out of her bra, and revealed that she was a hard-faced guy under all that makeup. That blew me away. I was only a child and couldn't even conceive of anything like that. But I looked out at the theater audience and they were *going* for it, applauding wildly and cheering. (Jackson 1988, 38–39)

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Michael learned from the appeal of this staged, queer revelation; a representational intransitivity gleaned from "secret" knowledge appreciated all the more because it is so accessible. Once Michael embarked on his adult solo career, even before he read and gave Frank DiLeo copies of a book about Barnum, he wanted to keep lurid rumors about him in circulation. The Apollo crowd young Michael watches revels in being included in the cross-dressing deception. A similar kind of maneuvering Michael starts with an August 1979 interview for *Jet* magazine, in which he reminds the reporter of "a nasty rumor ... claiming that he had undergone a sex change" (Johnson 1979, 32). To prove the scandal's ongoing tenacity, Michael relays the following encounter with a female fan: "This beautiful girl with blonde hair was trying her hardest to pull me into her to kiss her. ... She said, 'You're so sexy, kiss me,' When I showed no kind of interest in her, she said, 'What's wrong, you fag?' and walked off" (quoted in Johnson 1979, 32).

That kind of publicity strategy later impressed the *National Enquirer* reporter Charles Montgomery, who published the first notorious stories about the star who "likes to see himself portrayed in an absurd, bizarre way" (quoted in Taraborrelli 1991, 435). Montgomery did, too. Understanding Michael Jackson™'s intent did not dissuade Montgomery from providing the kind of coverage Michael needed for his feat. Neither did it tarnish the tantalizing luster of the lurid or macabre details Montgomery doled out. In fact, Montgomery continued to admire Michael the more he wrote:

> In the years to come, I would do the biggest number of stories on Michael in the *Enquirer*. Before I ran anything, I would always check with people close to Michael to see how accurate it was. I almost always had full cooperation from his camp. Michael Jackson is one of the smartest entertainers in the business. He knows how to get his name out there. He knows about P.R. He knows how to control his career. I think he's brilliant. (Quoted in Taraborrelli 1991, 435)

However brilliant he can be now, in the wake of his acquittal, signals the degree to which any Michael-interlocutor reads his guilt through the scandalous "theatre of countersignature" Michael Jackson™ mediates. Michael's days in court trump the speculation he so handily courts.

Here, I have tried to keep in play the Michael Jackson™ materialist premise that finds profound impact in a "*materiality of discourse*" that Hortense Spillers finds "as solid an aspect of political economy as the Gross Domestic Product [in] its far-flung subtleties and evasions, its coded displacement and well-choreographed insinuations" (Spillers 2003, 7). I wanted to analyze and narrate the wrenching re-contextualization Michael Jackson™ makes possible with a career-life in which the "public [often] feels a certain complicity" (Alter 1993, 39). Or, as Simon Dumenco laments, "*our* Michael, *our* icon—a (formerly) gifted artist" has become now "our American tragedy." For proof, Dumenco claims that Michael's face in his 2003 mug shot is "now, chiefly, a metaphor" (2003, 34). Dumenco presumes that Michael's arrest photograph does not represent the stylized, metaphoric subject he aimed to present at that time, but instead

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captures a ''corroded 45-year-old man'' overtaken by deviant desires (Dumenco 2003, 34). That is the fallen icon that Camille Paglia finds outside the Santa Maria courthouse, as she explains the ''pajama problem'' on the 11 March 2005 (23:00 EST) installment of HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*: ''He's as much a victim of fame as Nora Desmond. He's become such a terrible vision of someone who's collapsing backwards into a kind of—a kind of infantilism. As we see, he's being helped into court yesterday in his pajamas and so on. I think this is just an awful spectacle in front of us.'' Such analysis aims to settle the Michael Jackson™ that Michael has little interest in cohering so tidily. For example, on the Sunday after his pajama promenade, he narrates the events that lead to his ''serious back problem'' on the 27 March 2005 edition of the syndicated radio show *Keep Hope Alive with Reverend Jesse Jackson* (syndicated, 27 March 2005), with details that could suggest the staging of the performance he delivered that morning: ''I was coming out of the shower and I fell. And all my body weight—no, I mean, I'm pretty fragile—all my body weight fell against my rib cage. And I pretty much—I bruised my lung pretty badly. My lung is on the right. I'm in pain as we speak. I've been going to court every day in immense pain, in agonizing pain. We're still watching it very closely.'' Falling forward on a rib cage could have little to do with the ''serious back problem'' that came dressed in blue print pajamas on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. Michael's story complements the photographic felicity that *Gothamist* editor Jen Cheung cheers in Michael's booking shot number 621785: ''Just when you thought you were tired of Michael Jackson, he becomes interesting again. Admit it—there could not be a more insane mugshot picture'' (Cheung 2003). I, too, appreciate Michael's virtually literary craft in that ''insane mugshot picture,'' which culminates his negotiated surrender to an arrest warrant issued after a Neverland Ranch raid, publicized by footage shot from looming helicopters. Surveillance awaits a curiosity Michael continues to deliver with such precision.

Seth Clark Silberman, *New York, USA*

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